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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

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RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

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SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PREL LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: SHOOTING IN ZAHLE KILLS TWO PHALANGE MEMBERS

SUMMARY

**¶1.** (U) On April 20, two members of former President Amine Gemayel's Phalange party ("Kataeb") were killed and two others wounded during a shooting incident at a party branch office. During an inauguration ceremony for the new office, two Zahle residents, followers of MP Elie Skaff (who is allied with Free Patriotic Movement Michel Aoun) became angry when they were purportedly stopped by roadblocks from passing through near the office. They returned later in the evening and shot at Phalange party members. The security services are pursuing the suspects and the cousin of one suspect turned himself in to the Internal Security Force. This intra-Christian incident indicates mounting political tension. End summary.

**¶2.** (U) On April 20, two members of former President Amine Gemayel's Phalange party ("Kataeb") were shot dead and two others were injured in a shooting that took place at the inauguration of a Phalange branch office in Zahle. While press accounts vary somewhat, it appears that road blocks were set up during a ceremony to open the office. Joseph Zouki and his brother, followers of MP Elie Skaff (an ally of Free Patriotic Movement Michel Aoun and rival of Gemayel), who live on the same street in Zahle, were upset when barred from entry by the Internal Security Forces (ISF). Returning after the roadblock was removed, they shot at Phalange party members, killing two and wounding two others.

**¶3.** (SBU) Press reports indicate that the security services have launched a massive manhunt for the suspected killers. Zouki, who has a prior criminal record and has served time in jail, is still at large, and his cousin has turned himself into the ISF. It is not yet confirmed whether his cousin was at the Phalange office when the crime occurred.

**¶4.** (U) The Phalange party issued a statement noting that the shooting took place shortly after Sami Gemayel, son of Amine, left the inauguration. Amine Gemayel immediately summoned members of the party's politburo at his mansion in Bikfaya to discuss the attack. Prime Minister Fouad Siniora telephoned Gemayel and offered his condolences. Siniora also made phone calls to ISF DG Ashraf Rifi and Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Suleiman asking them to intensify their search efforts and to arrest the culprits.

**¶5.** (U) Gemayel called for restraint and calm and urged the government as well as the security authorities to bring the culprits to justice without delay. "The criminal is not Shaker al-Absi. He is known. We demand the government and the security forces put their hands on the criminals as soon as possible," Gemayel added.

**¶6.** (SBU) In a telephone conversation with the Charge, Gemayel said he suspected that the culprit had crossed the border into Syria and added that this attack was clearly pre-meditated and he expects more violence before the issue is resolved. Gemayel said he has been publicly calling for calm, but added that it should be Skaff's people calling for calm because "We are the victims."

¶7. (SBU) For his part, MP Skaff denounced the shooting and telephoned Amine Gemayel to offer his condolences. Skaff, who blamed the overall political tension in the country, told us on April 21 "the Phalange party as well as the Lebanese Forces have been carrying out provocative measures against my supporters for more than two years and unfortunately all of my warnings and efforts to contain the situation have fallen on deaf ears."

COMMENT

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¶8. (SBU) This is the most violent attack since the January 27 Mar Mikhael riots. This incident occurred between two Christian rival parties. Surprisingly, this attack was carried out by Skaff's supporters. Skaff is not known for harboring trouble-makers and thugs. However, this incident will leave its mark on Skaff's popularity in his hometown Zahle. End comment.